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ABSTRACT

One reason for a lack of religious literacy among undergraduates and members of society at large is the virtual absence of religion in high school textbooks. Thirty high school textbooks approved for use in North Carolina in the fields of United States and world history, economics, home economics, and biology were reviewed. The review revealed the textbooks lacked information about religions and religious understandings. While it is understood that it is not the proper role of public education to promote or denigrate religion, textbooks that ignore the significance of religion cannot be neutral given that religion continues to make important claims about the world. A different test of textbook neutrality is proposed: a textbook or curriculum is neutral if it is fair to the major contenders for important truths. Under this test, it is clear that neither textbooks nor public school curricula are neutral, for they don't take religion seriously as an alternative. (DB)

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CRIS Occasional Papers in Religion & Ethics

No. 1

RELIGIOUS LITERACY, TEXTBOOKS, AND RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY

by
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Religious Literacy, Textbooks, and Religious Neutrality

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Editor's note: This article is reprinted with permission from the Winter 1989 issue of Religion & Public Education. *An earlier draft had been presented at the American Educational Studies Association's 1988 annual meeting in Toronto. Although the article's original audiences were primarily public school educators, its topic – textbooks – is of course crucially relevant to independent school educators, too.*

During the past couple of years Americans have been treated to repeated demonstrations that we are a culturally illiterate people: surveys have shown that half of us can't find England on a world map; only 32 percent of our seventeen-year-olds can place the Civil War in the appropriate half-century; and high school students know less about science than their counterparts in any of the industrialized nations. In fact, the situation is so bad that E.D. Hirsch has made a successful small business of diagnosing, and prescribing for, our problems.

In all these revelations I've seen nothing about religious illiteracy, so I decided to put my students to the test. What should a reasonably well-educated undergraduate know about religion? I constructed a 30-question test covering three areas: the Bible, Western Religious Traditions, and World Religions. Seventy per cent was to be the passing score – my rough criterion for religious literacy. A colleague volunteered to give the test to two of his undergraduate classes so that altogether 126 students took the test. (My course was in philosophy of religion; his was in the history of American religion.)

I could reasonably have expected that our students would do well. After all, North Carolina is, according to some, the buckle on the Bible Belt. Moreover, these were not required courses; so one might assume that students who registered for them had an interest in religion. In fact, 53 percent had taken a college religion course before this one, and

13 percent had taken at least three religion courses. Finally, our students are fairly bright; the average SATs are about 1100.

So what percentage passed? Zero. The highest score was close: 68 percent. The average score: 28 percent.

The most obvious explanation for the low score, of course, may be that I have virtually no realistic sense of what it means to be religiously literate and asked unrealistically difficult questions. All I can do here is give you a few examples and let you decide for yourself.

While 81 percent of the students knew that Genesis is the first book of the Bible, only 54 percent could name the first two books.

Only 30 percent could provide anything at all approximating the first of the Ten Commandments, and only 33 percent could identify Passover.

While 82 percent could name the four Gospels, only 22 percent knew that the New Testament was originally written in Greek.

Only 19 percent knew that Peter is believed in Catholic tradition to have been the first pope; only two students of 126 could identify John XXIII as the pope who initiated the reforms of Vatican II.

Eighteen percent could place the Protestant Reformation in the correct century.

Fourteen percent could give even the most vague definition of Zionism.

Not a single student knew what the Social Gospel was.

One student of 126 knew that the Analects are part of the Confucian tradition.

Finally, in spite of all the news coverage of war and religious conflict in the Middle East, only nine percent of students could name the two major divisions of Islam (though 22 percent could name one or the other).

You will be relieved to know that education does count for something: students who had taken at least three undergraduate religion courses did almost twice as well as students who had taken none, outscoring them 45 percent to 24 percent. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that students who identified themselves as fundamentalists or evangelicals did about half again better than students who identified themselves as mainline or liberal, and about twice as well as agnostics or atheists. (Only four of the 126 students identified themselves as adherents of a religion other than Christianity.)

I claim no great scientific validity for my survey – but the results are suggestive.

Why this level of religious illiteracy? No doubt it has a great deal to do with how children are brought up nowadays and with the increasingly secular character of our culture generally. I will explore a more modest reason here, one that others have reported: the virtual absence of religion in the world of high school textbooks.

A Textbook Review

This last year I reviewed 30 high school textbooks approved for use in North Carolina in the fields of American and world history, economics, home economics, and biology. There is nothing peculiar about North Carolina textbooks; they are the standard texts of the major publishers. I will say a little about each kind of book.

History Texts

My review of the history texts led me to the same conclusions reached in all the previous studies by others: the texts don't take religion seriously; and as we page past the year 1800, religion virtually disappears in both the world and American history texts. They are almost exclusively concerned with political, social, and economic history; when religion is mentioned, it is almost always because of its effect on political or social history and not for its theological or cultural significance.

It is commonly held that Western culture has its roots in the classical world of Greece and Rome on the one hand, and in the Jerusalem of Judaism and Christianity on the other. Yet the typical world history text gives ten times as much space to Greece and Rome as it does to

all of Judaism and Christianity up to the Middle Ages. In fact, Egypt receives twice the space of ancient Israel, and Sumeria received more space than Israel in all but one of the texts I reviewed. Jesus receives, on average, four paragraphs, or less than half the space given to Eleanor of Aquitaine in one text, and to Joseph Stalin in another. One American history text gives more space to colonial farming than it does to colonial religion. Another gives more space to cowboys and cattle drives at the end of the nineteenth century than it does to all of religion after 1800. The average American history devotes one percent of its post-1800 pages to religion. (I should add that the texts are not equally bad).

Economics, Home Economics, and Biology Texts

The economics, home economics, and biology textbooks all essentially ignore religion. In 2600 hundred pages of text in six approved economics books, a total of one and one-half pages deal with religion. Only one of the six biology texts says anything about religion; it gives two paragraphs to explaining that religious views of creation are not scientifically testable and, therefore, are irrelevant to a scientific biology. The nine home economics texts I reviewed all begin with chapters on nature, values, and decision making. Most go on to discuss such topics as sex roles, abortion, family relationships, dating, and child rearing; yet religion never warrants more than a passing reference or occasional footnote in these books.

It should come as no surprise that students aren't literate about the simple facts of religion when there is next to nothing about it in their textbooks. None of the history books lists the Ten Commandments in its accounts of ancient Israel, nor do any of the home economics books in chapters on values and decision making. Though one of the five American history texts has two paragraphs on the Social Gospel, four don't mention it; and nothing is to be found in any of the six economics texts about it. None names the first two books of the Bible, and none mentions that Peter was taken to be the first pope. John the XXIII is granted a single sentence in one book. (On the other hand, all the world history texts give the century of the Protestant Reformation, yet only 18 percent of the students remembered it on the literacy test.)[1]

1) Although my study dealt only with high school history, economics, home economics, and biology textbooks, I doubt, from everything I have read and seen, that much about religion is to be found in any other kind of textbook at any other grade level—with the single exception of high school literature anthologies.

Facts vs. Meaning

E.D. Hirsch has often been criticized for fixation on cultural literacy as the accumulation of relatively straightforward facts, rather than arguing for what is sometimes called a "critical" or "liberating" literacy. A literate person, some of his critics argue, is not someone who can recite a bevy of facts; she is someone who understands how facts relate to one another and the contexts in which they do or do not make sense: she can reason or think critically about them. Hirsch claims that facts and critical thinking skills are inseparable. This is a central part of his argument. Unfortunately, he says so little about critical thinking, and so much about memorized facts, that any sense of proportion is lost.

I am inclined to think that some critics have rejected Hirsch too quickly and too completely. Nonetheless, I agree with his critics that Hirsch slights this broader notion of literacy[2] (and in the process provides meat for the insatiable testing movement by isolating learning into discrete, testable chunks). It is at this level that the problem of religious literacy is most acute. By themselves, the facts of religion make little sense; they become meaningful only if students can relate them to a larger context of understanding, if they can recognize the logic inherent in them, if they have some sense of their significance. Unfortunately, I don't have any neat survey data to supply, only my considered judgment (based on many hours of discussion and reading blue books) that far too many students lack any deep understanding of what religion is all about or how religious ways of understanding relate to other ways of understanding the world.

Of course, any account of what religion is, will be controversial; but it seems to me that it is at least this: traditional religion claims that the world has a meaning, a logic, which can be captured only in religious language and symbols that point us to the transcendent or the sacred. A part of this logic – for Western religion at least – is the idea that nature and history have a purpose, and that it is our responsibility to measure our lives, our conduct, and our institutions against that purpose and the ultimate meaning of existence. And, I would add, religious understanding cannot, by its very nature, be purely cognitive; it is affective and normative, obligating us as we recognize what it tells us.

2) See E. D. Hirsch, **Cultural Literacy** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 132-33.

Of course, any specific religion will be much more than this; my purpose here is simply to suggest a kind of lowest-common-denominator account of what most religion is about – be it fundamentalist or liberal.

The textbooks I reviewed not only ignored facts about religions; they also ignored specifically religious understandings of their respective subject matters. Equally important, they offered alternative ways of thinking about the world that are, at least arguably, at odds with this basic religious understanding of the world. Again, I will say just a little about each kind of textbook.

History Texts

Consider the following passage from one of the world history textbooks:

> Because the Egyptians feared the Hebrews, they made them slaves. The Hebrew leader Moses led the Hebrews from Egypt to Palestine. Under the rule of their early kings – Saul, David, and Solomon – the Hebrew nation prospered....
>
> King Solomon died about 900 BC. Then Palestine split into two kingdoms. The Kingdom of Israel was formed in the north. The Kingdom of Judah was formed in the south. The Kingdom of Israel lasted for 250 years. Then it was destroyed by the Assyrians. The kingdom of Judah lasted for 400 years. However, during much of its history it was part of other empires.[3]

What this string of "facts" ignores is the religious explanation for these events, the logic of rebellion and obedience, of divine reward and punishment. The scriptural meaning of the story is lost. Not only is the religious explanation dropped, but the rudiments of a secular explanation replace it. According to the textbook, Moses led the Hebrews out of bondage, not, as the Exodus account clearly says, God; the texts cite human causes – the leadership of kings and the actions of nations – for the events of history, not God's guiding hand, as Scripture has it.

It is central to traditional Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that history can be understood only in terms of God's purposes. Yet none of the history textbooks considers the possibility that there is a religious

3) **The Pageant of World History** (Prentice-Hall, 1986), 24.

logic or purpose to history. They don't even consider it to reject it. It simply isn't there. The causes and logic of history as they tell it are entirely secular. Even in their accounts of historical Judaism and Christianity the books say virtually nothing about how Jews and Christians understood history.

Economics Texts

The economic texts offer students the world of economics as understood by modern social science: persons are essentially self-interested social atoms with unlimited wants, competing for scarce resources; economics provides us the value-free calculus that enables us to maximize interest-satisfaction. The books say nothing about religious conceptions of human nature, according to which people are fundamentally social with irreducibly religious obligations; they never hint that economic institutions and values may be measured against religious principles and values; they say nothing about the teachings of great religious figures concerning justice; there is nothing in the texts about the Social Gospel, the Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on the economy, the Weber thesis, liberation theology, or the Religious Rights's defense of capitalism. The economics books discuss a social world void of any relationship to the transcendent; human nature, society, and "economic science" have been completely secularized.

Home Economics Texts

The home economics texts understand persons in terms of the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Self-actualization and the free choice of life-defining values are the primary goods of psychological development according to all the books. Students are told over and over again that they must choose their own values. When they make decisions, they are to think about what course of action will maximize whatever it is they most deeply value. One book comments that, unfortunately, not all students are capable of setting up a "dependable value system for themselves," but are, alas, "dependent upon family members or social institutions to guide them."[4] None of the books makes any effort whatsoever to situate students in a religious world: spiritual actualization is never mentioned as an alternative to self-actualization. Students are never told that their value

4) **Contemporary Living** (Goodheart, 1987), 75.

judgments are responsible to law, to tradition, to their implications for human suffering, or to religion. Of course, the language of sin is never used; in fact, the language of morality all but disappears (to be replaced by the more neutral language of "values"). These are the books that offer students what may be their only systematic introduction in public schools to human nature, values, and decision making; yet religious ways of thinking are as foreign to their understanding of the world as the worldview of Borneo headhunters.

Biology Texts

The biology books maintain a lofty indifference to all things religious, never mentioning, much less describing, religious ways of understanding nature (though one, as I mentioned above, does include two paragraphs distinguishing religious from scientific ways of thinking). While fundamentalists have great difficulty with the idea of evolution found in the biology texts, liberals typically don't – though perhaps they should. The biology texts don't teach generic evolution, which might be understood simply as God's way of doing things; they teach neo-Darwinian evolution, according to which change is the result of random mutation and recombination of genes and natural selection – i.e., evolution is intrinsically purposeless. In such an account, there, is, arguably, no room for claiming that there is a religious logic for evolution; for it is completely explainable on scientific grounds. Such evolution undercuts liberal, as much as fundamentalist, religion. Nature, as the texts describe it, is completely desacralized, devoid of divine meaning or purpose.

Summary

Obviously, much more needs to be said about each of these examples. Here I can only suggest that in each kind of textbook the authors have left out not just religious facts, but, more importantly, religious ways of understanding their subject. In their place are only secular ways of understanding the world.

Neutrality

Many Americans, most educators, and the Supreme Court all hold that public education should be religiously neutral – that it is not the proper goal of education to promote or denigrate religion. Justice Fortas gave perhaps the clearest statement of this position in *Epperson v. Arkansas*.

> Government in our democracy, state and national, must be neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine, and practice. It may not be hostile to any religion or to the advocacy of non-religion; and it may not aid, foster, or promote one religion or religious theory against another or even against the militant opposite. The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.[5]

What counts as neutrality is notoriously difficult to say. I will offer only the briefest sketch of an account, together with my assessment of the neutrality of existing textbooks.

The Meanings of "Neutrality"

There are, I think, two quite different ways of defining neutrality. (1) A textbook (or a curriculum) is neutral if it makes no claims, negative or positive, explicit or implied, about religion. We might call this the "religion-free" model (the rough analogy being to the efforts of educators to be "value-free").

None of the textbooks is explicitly hostile to (contemporary) religion. They are *implicitly* hostile to religion, however. First, they either underplay or, more often, simply ignore religion in telling their stories. That is, their standards of significance, of what is important to include in textbook accounts of a subject, are quite different from those that are internal to religion.

Traditional religions have made claims about social justice, about human psychology, about nature, and about history. These claims have not been peripheral to what religion has been all about, but have conveyed what religious believers have taken to be centrally important truths about the world. The textbooks imply, though they typically don't explicitly state, that students can understand everything important about their subject without bringing religion into the discussion. Even the history textbooks that do (inadequately) review the role of religion in history don't use (or even suggest the use of) religious categories in explaining how history works. In effect, the textbooks tell students that religion is insignificant.

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5) **Epperson v. Arkansas** 393 U.S. 97 (1968), 103-4.

When we look at the overall curriculum, the message is even more striking. Public schools and public universities allow students to earn high school diplomas, college degrees, M.B.A.s, J.D.s, M.D.s, and Ph.D.s without ever confronting a religious idea (except, probably, in a few English classes). The message is: no matter what you study, you can learn everything important to know about it without knowing or thinking anything about religion.

This may be true. The question, however, is whether this position is religiously neutral. The answer, clearly, is "no." Religion continues to make important claims about the world, and textbooks and curricula that ignore those claims are not neutral toward them; they are saying, implicitly, that those claims are insignificant and we can ignore them at our pleasure. Textbook authors and curriculum designers have adopted not just different, but conflicting, standards of what it is important for students to understand.

(2) The second, and more important, violation of neutrality concerns truth. Is the claim that the highest good of people is self-actualization simply different from, and neutral regarding, the claim that the highest good of people is to know God? Is the claim that people are essentially self-interested utility-maximizers, simply different from, and neutral regarding, the claim that people are fundamentally social beings with irreducible obligations to love humankind? Is the claim that evolution is purposeless compatible with, and neutral regarding, the claim that God is sovereign over nature? There are philosophers and cultural critics who argue that religious and scientific claims do not conflict because they are part of different, and incommensurable, conceptual schemes or universes of discourse; they may each be "true" within their respective conceptual environments.

I'm not inclined to accept this analysis: these claims do conflict, though we come to accept either the religious or the scientific claim as true not by any kind of straightforward experiment or test, but because we find, over time, that one kind of conceptual scheme is, in some way, more adequate to (or truer of) reality than the other. Though much of modern science and social science may seem *explicitly* quite compatible with, hence neutral regarding, religion, *implicitly* science and religion tell us quite different and conflicting things about the world.

It may be useful to recall the last 300 years of Western intellectual history. In the modern period the claims of traditional religion have

come more and more to be rejected as modern science and social science have redefined reality for us. In fact, for most intellectuals, traditional religion is no longer a serious possibility precisely because they have come to accept the ways of thinking found in the textbooks instead of traditional religious ways of understanding the world.[6]

Now if one believes that (at least some) central religious claims about the world are in conflict with (at least some) central scientific claims about the world, then to teach the scientific view of the world is not to be neutral in the sense of being "religion-free." It is implicitly to undermine religion.

A Fairness Test

I would like to suggest a somewhat different test of neutrality: *a textbook or curriculum is neutral if it is fair to the major contenders for important truths.* (I assume that there are insurmountable practical problems with being fair to all contenders for all truths.) To be fair is to take alternatives seriously. To take an alternative seriously is to be open to it, to allow advocates of it to speak for themselves (rather than filtering what they say through the putatively neutral screen of an observer), and to provide sufficient time for a coherent case to be made.

To be rigorously fair is to do away with textbooks and substitute various kinds of primary source material; this is necessary if defenders of various positions are to speak for themselves. No doubt this is often impractical, school financing being what it is. Nonetheless, if we are going to take neutrality seriously, then there has to be more money for primary source material and anthologies.

Given what has already been said, it should be clear that neither textbooks nor public school curricula are neutral on this test, for they don't take seriously religion as one of the alternatives.

6) I do not mean to suggest that textbooks are responsible for the secularization of the Western mind. They largely reflect the intellectual movement of the larger intellectual culture. But they also transmit the ways of thinking that are intellectually dominant and in the process contribute to the transformation of the traditional culture.

The difference is that "neutrality as fairness" is a possibility, while "religion-free" neutrality isn't. All important claims about nature, history, psychology, and economics are essentially contested claims; and there is no "neutral," no objective, vantage point from which to judge the alternatives. This does not mean that there is not truth to be had. It does mean that any claim to be neutral is in principle suspect: any specific claim, any methodology for ascertaining truth, is one of several contenders. The question, then, is whether we are willing to take various contenders seriously. Are we going to be "neutral" in the sense of fairly considering alternative ways of understanding the world?

If we are to be neutral in this sense regarding religion, then textbooks (or, better, anthologies) must take religion seriously; they must not just mention it as an historical force; they must take it seriously as providing categories through which we might now understand nature, history, psychology, and the economic world religiously.

I might add that I am not arguing that textbook authors or curriculum developers have had the *explicit* purpose of denigrating religion (though I'm sure a few have). Their work has had the clear and important effect of denigrating religion, however.[7] The short-term effect is clearly evident in our students: they are increasingly religiously illiterate.

In fact, it might be argued that the result is a kind of indoctrination against religion. The most pernicious form of indoctrination is not legal exclusion; nor is it a matter of explicitly hostile propaganda, which at least does the opposition the honor of taking it seriously. Rather, it is the avowedly open education that steadfastly promotes one way of thinking (secular, scientific thinking) while it ignores other (religious) ways of thinking to the point where students are not given the factual, theoretical, imaginative, or emotional resources to make the (religious)

7) In a series of rulings, beginning with **Abington v. Schempp** in 1963, the Court has articulated two basic criteria for determining neutrality. First, the Court has said that if the purpose of legislation is to promote or denigrate religion, it is unconstitutional – it is not neutral regarding religion. Second, the Court has ruled that the primary effect of legislation cannot be to promote or denigrate religion; I am arguing that an effect of secular education is the denigration of religion. Whether this is the primary effect is, of course, a value judgment. Many conservative religious folks believe that the denigration of religion has been the primary effect of modern education.

alternative credible. By this move, religion is gently exiled, in effect, to the realm of private superstition.

I want to be clear about what I am saying. I am not saying that modern science and secular ways of understanding the world are false or in any way unreasonable. I am not saying that traditional religion is true. I am saying that textbooks essentially ignore religion; and, more importantly, they are based on philosophical assumptions about reality that are hostile to traditional religion. The result is that they are not religiously neutral.

Of course, one might argue that religious neutrality should not constrain education—the First Amendment notwithstanding. Surely this is the position of most scholars in higher education: let educated inquiry go where it will; let us teach our students whatever we take to be true, and let the chips of neutrality fall where they may. I have been concerned to argue only that considerable religious illiteracy—on two somewhat different levels—exists and that one important reason for this is textbooks that are not neutral but effectively hostile toward religion. If neutrality is to be restored (whether for legal, moral, intellectual, or pedagogical reasons), textbooks must have much more about religion in them, and they must take it seriously as a way for understanding the world. Whether such neutrality is, all things considered, a good thing is another question; certainly another set of arguments is required to make that case. ♦